

CHELSEA CLINCH IT LATE

Rafa's race all but run

AFP, London



Rafael Benitez came close to conceding defeat in the Premier League title battle after a shock 2-0 defeat at Middlesbrough left Liverpool struggling to keep leaders Manchester United within sight.

The demoralising defeat at the Riverside allowed Chelsea, who, snatched a last-gasp winner against Wigan, to move into second place on goal difference.

But the real winners were champions Manchester United, who now stand seven points clear of both their closest rivals with a game in hand.

"Before the game it was very difficult (to catch United), now it will be more difficult," Benitez admitted before bemoaning the poor finishing that had cost his side the chance of victory.

"You have to take your chances if you want to win these games," he said. "The first 30 minutes we had five chances and we didn't score a goal. It has been a problem during the season and today has been the same."

Three days after beating Real Madrid in the Bernabeu, Liverpool were brought back down to earth with a painful

bump as a Xabi Alonso own goal and a second-half strike for man-of-the-match Tuncay Sanli gave Boro their first league win since November 9.

Chelsea's late show epitomised the battling spirit they have rediscovered since Guus Hiddink's arrival as temporary manager but the Dutchman is not optimistic about the chances of chasing down United.

"Let's be realistic," he said. "We are depending on the loss of points of Man United and we must win our games. United is very stable but, as long as it is possible, we don't give up."

United did not have a league game at the weekend because of Sunday's League Cup final date with Tottenham, which will see Sir Alex Ferguson's side attempt to claim their second trophy of the season following their triumph in the World Club Championship in Japan in December.

Arsenal were jeered off the pitch by their own supporters after a 0-0 draw at home to Fulham -- their fifth straight draw in the league and a fourth consecutive goalless stalemate.

If Aston Villa can beat relegation-threatened Stoke on Sunday, the Gunners will find themselves eight points adrift of a top four finish with only 11 games left to close the gap.

"We dropped two points we basically couldn't afford to

drop today," acknowledged Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger whose side now look as if they may have to win this year's Champions League if they are to return to the tournament next season.

Chelsea had been far from convincing early on but they seized control of the match midway through the opening period thanks to a John Terry volley that was deflected into the net off Emerson Boyce.

Olivier Kapo claimed a 82nd-minute equaliser for Wigan who were left aggrieved over what they felt was a push by Frank Lampard on Mario Melchiot just before he headed in the winner.

"It was a blatant push and the referee was only ten yards away," fumed Wigan boss Steve Bruce. "Sometimes you go to these big clubs and the amount of decisions that go against the smaller clubs is unbelievable. It really is."

Australia midfielder Tim Cahill helped Everton move to within two points of fifth-placed Arsenal with a headed opener in a 2-0 win over bottom side West Brom.

Cahill's eighth goal of the season came late in the first half at Goodison Park and Louis Saha sealed the points with a sublime second after the break, leaving the Baggies winless in eight matches and looking doomed to an immediate return to the Championship.



Chelsea star Frank Lampard (L) and Michael Ballack celebrate after the former scored a last minute winner in their Premier League match against Wigan at Stamford Bridge on Saturday.

City's blues continue

INTERNET, undated

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The young midfielder was on hand to lob the ball home in the 71st minute after Shay Given could only parry Savio's curling effort from the left corner of the penalty area.

But the Hammers' day was marred by a serious injury to Valon Behrami, who was carried off in obvious pain in the first half after catching his studs in the turf as he challenged Wayne Bridge, badly twisting his ankle and knee.

Robinho saw one first half

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Rule changes to continue

INTERNET, undated

Football's rulemakers have given the go ahead for the extension of an additional assistant referees experiment while a controversial proposal to extend the half-time break from 15 to 20 minutes has been dropped. The International FA Board (IFAB) agreed the move at its annual general meeting in Newcastle in Northern Ireland.

"After having received a report on the experiment involving additional assistant referees conducted during UEFA U-19 European Championship qualifying tournaments in October and November 2008, the members of the Board gave permission for the continuation of FIFA's experiment with additional assistant referees, this time in a professional league," said the IFAB in a statement.

FIFA withdrew its proposal to extend the maximum duration of the half-time interval while IFAB agreed that the proposal to increase the maximum number of substitutions in the event of extra time should be discussed by the relevant FIFA committees.

The meeting also decided that one member of the coaching staff be allowed to stay in the technical area after giving tactical instructions to their team.

Furthermore, it was decided that if a team has more players on the field than their opponents at the start of a penalty shoot-out, the other team has to reduce their own numbers to ensure parity.

The IFAB are made up of representatives of the four associations from the United Kingdom, who each have a vote, and FIFA, who have four. A three-quarter majority is required for any proposal to be passed.

Marchisio fires Juve

AFP, Rome



Juventus edged Napoli 1-0 on Saturday to keep their Serie A title hopes alive by cutting Inter Milan's lead at the top to six points.

A deflected shot from Claudio Marchisio effort on the stroke of half-time gave Claudio Ranieri's team the three points although Inter can restore their advantage on Sunday when they tackle Roma.

"It was important to win after the Champions League game (Juventus lost 1-0 at Chelsea in midweek). It isn't

easy to get back that determination and concentration," said Ranieri.

"The lads had a great first half, but then Napoli lost that initial tension and threw everything they had at us. Nonetheless, (goalkeeper) Gianluigi Buffon had precious little to do."

David Trezeguet was given a rare start in the Juve line-up and he could have scored after 15 minutes when Marco Marchionni's cross found the French striker but his shot was saved by Navarro.

Moments later Juventus's Nicola Legrottaglie was booked for bringing down German Denis and he will be suspended for the Turin derby.

Napoli could have scored on 38 minutes but Marek Hamsik saw his drive saved by Gianluigi Buffon in the Juventus goal.

Juventus took the lead in the 44th minute when Marchisio collected the ball from Christian Poulsen and his shot took a deflection off ex-Juventus player Manuele Blasi on its way into the goal.

Napoli thought they had levelled in the dying minutes of the game when Ezequiel Lavezzi found the net but his effort was ruled out for offside.

In Saturday's other game, Mauro Zarate scored twice to give Lazio a 2-0 win over Bologna and keep up their hopes of a UEFA Cup spot next season.

Lille struggling

AFP, Paris

Strugglers Valenciennes scotched Lille's attempts to have a say in the French title race on Saturday with a 2-0 success which denied the former a temporary share of second place in the table.

Lille, who enjoyed a brief foray into the Champions League three seasons ago, stay sixth after goals in quick succession from Gael Danic and former Glasgow Rangers striker Jean-Claude Darcheville around the half-hour mark put paid to their lofty ambitions.

The northerners stay on 43 points from 27 games, one behind Bordeaux, who host Lorient on Sunday.

Toulouse were hoping to bag second place themselves at least overnight with three points at Auxerre in the late match.

Valenciennes pushed into midtable after they made it nine matches unbeaten in all competitions.

Elsewhere Saturday, Nice saw their hopes of bagging a potential place in Europe fade after a 1-0 loss at Sochaux, now level on points with fourth-bottom Caen.

Nantes and Grenoble shared a 1-1 draw and Le Mans moved away from the danger zone with a 2-0 home win over a Le Havre side which appears doomed after a 20th league defeat left them ten points behind St Etienne.

Malouda thinking about future

INTERNET, undated

Florent Malouda has admitted he could be forced to consider his future with Chelsea.

The France international has struggled to hold down a regular place at Stamford Bridge following his £13.5million move from Lyon in July 2007.

Sacked coach Luiz Felipe Scolari admitted in an interview given before his departure that Malouda was not playing to his peak of his creative powers.

The midfielder has featured once in new boss Guus Hiddink's three games at the helm and has admitted he may look elsewhere unless he can secure more regular action before the summer.

Malouda told reporters: "I would like to play more and there are three more months to try and get a space in the team."

"But if that doesn't happen I will have to analyse the situation."

Malouda was linked with a switch to Juve during the winter transfer window, although the Serie A side moved to quell the speculation.



PHOTO: AFP

Hertha Berlin striker Andrej Voronin (R) and midfielder Pai Dardai celebrate at the end of their win against Bundesliga rivals Borussia Moenchengladbach at the Olympic Stadium in Berlin on Saturday.

Voronin at it again

AFP, Berlin



Andrej Voronin hit his fourth goal in four games on Saturday to help put Hertha

back on top of the Bundesliga as the leaders sealed a 2-1 win over bottom club Borussia Moenchengladbach.

The Ukrainian striker, on loan from Liverpool, hit a first-half goal, which showcased his excellent finishing, before Hungary midfielder Pal Dardai put Hertha 2-0 up at half-time.

United States midfielder Michael Bradley converted a penalty for Moenchengladbach on 69 minutes after Hertha's Germany defender Arne Friedrich brought down international teammate Marko Marin in the area.

Berlin now have a one-point lead, but their stay at the top could only last 24 hours as second-placed Hamburg face fifth-placed Wolfsburg on Sunday.

"I would have taken this result before the match without a second thought," admitted Hertha coach Lucien Favre.

"We knew that Moenchengladbach would be hard to beat and it was important that we led them."

"They came back at us when they were 2-0 down, so it was no surprise it was closer at the end."

"But it was very important for us to get a win after last weekend's defeat at Wolfsburg."

Third-placed Hoffenheim missed out on the chance to claim top spot when they were held 0-0 at Borussia Dortmund.

Both sides were reduced to ten men when Hoffenheim midfielder Tobias Weis retaliated after being brought down by Dortmund's Sebastian Kehl.

Weis was shown a straight red while Kehl was shown his second yellow.

After both sides heroics in Europe in midweek, Bayern Munich on Sunday travel to face Werder Bremen, who are without goalkeeper Tim Wiese, while Bayern are missing striker Luca Toni and defender Daniel van Buyten.

Bayern stunned Sporting Lisbon 5-0 in the Champions League Round of 16 on Wednesday, while Werder Bremen knocked AC Milan out of the UEFA Cup the following day.

Defending champions Munich are now five points behind Hertha in fourth and badly need a win after three defeats in their last four games while Bremen are down in 11th.

Relegation candidates Bochum escaped the bottom three after a 3-2 win over fellow strugglers Energie

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Jose for Fergie: Rio

Football

AFP, London

Manchester United defender Rio Ferdinand insists Jose Mourinho has what it takes to succeed Alex Ferguson as the Red Devils' manager, in an interview due out Thursday.

England centre-half Ferdinand reckons the Portuguese coach has the credentials to follow in 67-year-old Ferguson's footsteps.

Mourinho -- who guided United's rivals Chelsea to two English Premier League titles -- is the manager of Italian champions Inter Milan, who face Manchester United in the Champions League round of 16.

The two sides played out a goalless draw in the first leg in Milan on Tuesday and play the

second leg at Old Trafford on March 11.

"There are very few people who could take over," Ferdinand told GQ magazine.

"If you're talking about someone with the ego and personality to do it, then Jose Mourinho is the name that jumps out at you."

However, United legend Bobby Charlton does not believe Mourinho would be able to build on Ferguson's legacy.

"I would hate for anyone to take this the wrong way but I don't see him here," the World Cup winner told The Mail on Sunday newspaper.

"He's got a talent but maybe if he ever came here the philosophy of youth football might never be the same again."

And fellow club hero Bryan Robson added: "Attacking football is a vital part of the

club's heritage.

"For me, Jose Mourinho is too cautious in his approach to the game to be manager."

Ferdinand gave an insight into the kind of personality required for the job as he detailed Ferguson's notorious "hairdryer" treatment -- giving players a full-on verbal roasting.

"It's not pretty, it's unbelievable," he said.

"If you talk back to him, he just keeps going louder and louder until you shut up."

"The worst we've seen is after we behaved badly on a night out. Then, the fireworks explode and he goes bananas. Everyone's heads are on the floor, trying not to catch his eye."

"And he's right to do it and we all know that if we do it again, we'll be out the door. He's a winner, full stop."



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid midfielder Jose Gutierrez fires a free-kick into the top right-hand corner of the net to score in their Primera Liga encounter against Espanyol at the Olympic Stadium in Espanyol on Saturday.